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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed survey research conducted in 1992 in a suburban metropolitan New York City community, predominantly white, with an 18 percent black, a 4 percent Asian and 4 percent Latino population. The community had an 11% poverty rate. The longitudinal study questioned 305 10th-graders, most of them born outside the United States, by self-administered questionnaires. A theoretical base for the study was established by reviewing the research available on the social bonding theory. By examining family's, friends' and ethnic group's valuing of education, using Likert-type scales for analyses, social and personal influences in school staying plans were noted. Family and friends had a greater influence on staying in school than did ethnic groups. For females, the greater impact on the decision for school staying was from peers; for males, the family had a greater influence. Limitations of the study focused on: (1) the narrow geographic range of subject group and the high school staying plans of the sample; (2) the restricted range of responses; (3) the first phase of the longitudinal study making the variable choice "school staying plans," instead of "dropout," which may be a more appropriate term; and (4) the sample, which was comprised of approximately 15-year-old 10th grade students, making interpretations of data difficult. Recommendations for dropout prevention focused on enhancing social support for remaining in school and creating new primary social groups for bonding. (EH)

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The Impact of Social Support on Staying in School: A Preliminary Report

by

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High school dropout is recognized to be a grave social problem (Beck & Muia, 1980; Bickel & Papagiannis, 1988; Fagan & Pabon, 1990; Hahn, 1987; Natriello, Pallas, & McDill, 1986; Pallas, 1987; Rumberger, 1987). While school dropout has been traditionally considered an educational problem and the study of it conducted largely in terms of its in-school correlates, it is increasingly being analyzed as a social problem whose causes and consequences are found external to, as well as within the school environment (Fagan & Pabon, 1990; Farrell, 1990; Hahn, 1987; Mann, 1986; Ogbu, 1989; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989; Rumberger, 1987; Stedman, Salganik, & Celebuski, 1988; Svec, 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). A number of researchers are calling for dropout research to move beyond focusing on in-school factors to consider a wide variety of social and personal influences on dropout (Fagan & Pabon, 1990; Harris, 1983; Rumberger, 1987; Svec, 1987).

There is scattered evidence that suggests that dropout may be influenced by social support for staying in school, that is, the valuing of education by those who are proximal to the student outside school. Findings concerning social support for education typically have been incidental in studies focusing on other variables. Most of the data relevant to social support for education use indirect measures; level of parents' education (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Frank, 1990; Rumberger, 1983), presence of reading materials in the home (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger, 1983), parental involvement with school

activities (Brennan & Anderson, 1990; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990) and parental monitoring of student's homework (Ekstrom, et al., 1986; Stedman, et al., 1988) all have been found to be positively related to school staying. School staying also is positively associated with having parents with high expectations for their children's educational achievement (Delgado-Gaitan, 1988; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger et al., 1990, Schrom, 1980); with the student's perception that the parents expect him or her to remain in school (Brennan & Anderson, 1990; Schrom, 1980), although this finding was not obtained by others (Hanson & Ginsburg, 1988); with the educational aspirations of friends (Brennan & Anderson, 1990; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Hanson & Ginsburg, 1988; Rumberger, 1983); and with friends' interest in school (Pittman, 1991).

There does exist theory that makes sense of this suggestive evidence. The theory of social bonding implies the importance of these "valuing of education" variables by focusing on the relationship between affectional ties between the individual adolescent and representatives of the larger society (Hawkins & Weis, 1985; Hirschi, 1969). This theory further implies that the greater the bond the adolescent has to his or her family, friends and community, the less likely she or he will be to dropout of high school, assuming each of these units is supportive of school staying.

Social bonding theory asserts that an individual is constrained from deviant behavior by his or her social bond to

conventional society (Hirschi, 1969). This bond is influenced by the person's affective relationships, his or her pursuit of socially approved goals, and his or her acceptance of the validity and legitimacy of the social order (Hirschi, 1969). Others have expanded the theory to adolescents and emphasized the importance of family and peers as representatives of the larger society (Hawkins & Weis, 1985).

There has been one empirical study that, although not guided explicitly by social bonding theory, has approached dropout in a way consistent with the theory (Hanson & Ginsburg, 1988). These researchers focused on the valuing of education by people in the student's immediate social environment. Findings from this study indicate modest correlations between school staying and the student's adherence to responsible (conventional) school values (e.g., work ethic, obedience to authority), friendship with students with conventional school values and parents with conventional school values. The researchers found that the student's adherence to conventional values was correlated with school staying. They further found that the more a student's parents and peers manifested conventional values, the greater the likelihood of school staying.

Social bonding theory focuses on the bonding between the adolescent and societal representatives; it contains the assumption, never made explicit, that the social institutions with which the individual bonds reflect the "desired" values. The theory asserts that the strength of the bonding on the part

of the adolescent determines the strength of the "desired" behavior which he or she will manifest. We will expand on this conceptualization and theorize that if the institutional representatives do not manifest the "desired" values, we would not expect the individual to manifest the "desired" behaviors. In addition, we theorize that the desired outcomes are a function of both the degree of bonding and the degree to which the "bonded with" elements reflect the desired behavior.

This study will assume that the bonding is occurring and will investigate how variations in the values of those with whom the individual bonds affect the target behavior of the adolescent. It will focus on the family, peers and ethnic community as societal representatives with whom an adolescent can bond, and on the adolescent's perception of these units' valuing of education.

This paper describes a study that investigates the degree to which social support, in terms of the "bonder's" perception of his or her family's, friends' and ethnic group's valuing of education, has an impact on the degree to which the adolescent plans to stay in school.

Method

Survey research procedures were employed to test the relationship between social support for education and dropout.

Dropout behavior, per se, is not reported in this preliminary report; rather, the proxy variable, "school staying plans" was used. High correlations have been reported between

expected school attainment and actual dropout (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Hanson & Ginsburg, 1988; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). The variable "school staying plans" was measured by a three item 5-point Likert type scale; an example item asks the respondent to rate her or his level of agreement with the statement, "There is a real possibility that I may quit high school before I graduate". The internal consistency reliability of this three-item scale (Cronbach's alpha) is .68 (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Data on perceived social support for education were collected with three new scales, developed specifically for this study, measuring family's, friends' and ethnic group's valuing of education. All three scales are Likert-type and a score was obtained for each scale by summing responses to all items in that scale.

"Perception of family's valuing of education" is a four item scale; an example item asks a respondent to report on her or his level of agreement with the statement, "My family would never be willing to let me drop out of high school". The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of this four item scale is .45 (see Table 1). "Perception of friends' valuing of education" also is a four item scale. An example item asks the respondent to report on her or his level of agreement with the statement, "My friends really don't like school very much and

they stay away whenever they can". The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of this four item scale is .63. "Perception of ethnic group's valuing of education" is a three item scale. An example item asks the respondent to report on her or his level of agreement with the statement, "People in my ethnic community don't feel that a high school education is really necessary" (a definition of ethnic group membership had been provided earlier). The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the scale is .62. Low reliability of social attitude scales seems to be characteristic of middle adolescence (Wilson, 1963).

All scales have face content validity; on the face of it, the contents of each scale reflects the meaning intended for that scale. In addition, confirmatory factor analysis of the 11 social support items revealed three factors which coincide with the three theoretical variables (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

The setting for the study is a suburban metropolitan New York City community characterized by preliminary 1990 U.S. Census data (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) as having a population of approximately 78,000 people, of whom 74% are white, 18% are Black, 4% are Asian and 4% are Latino; the community has an 11% poverty rate.

A longitudinal study was initiated in the fall of 1992 in one high school in this community. Data were collected from 305

tenth-graders, in class, by self-administered questionnaires. This suburban school is unusual in that it serves families from a great variety of ethnic groups, including Asians, African-Americans, Caribbeans (non-Haitian, non-Latino), Haitians, Jews, Latinos and Western Europeans; each group contains substantial numbers of students (see Table 3). Nearly one-quarter of the students were born outside the U.S., over 40% have mothers who are foreign born and nearly half have fathers who are foreign born. But approximately two-thirds of both mothers and fathers are reported to have attended (but not necessarily been graduated from) college. The students were fairly evenly divided by sex: 46% female and 54% male.

Insert Table 3 about here

Findings

Data were analyzed by multiple regression; the three predictor variables, family's valuing of education, friends' valuing of education, and ethnic group's valuing of education, produced a multiple R of .49 with 24% of the variance in planned school staying explained [$F(3, 301) = 31.66$, $p < .0001$] (see Table 4). Zero order correlations between school staying and the three social support variables are: family's valuing of education .41, friend's valuing of education .32 and ethnic group's valuing of education .29 (see Table 4). The standardized regression coefficients (beta weights) for these variables and school

staying are: family's valuing .33, friends' valuing .19 and ethnic group's valuing .14.

Insert Table 4 about here

The analysis indicates that the overlapping content among the three variables, together, produced an R-squared of .08. A series of "forced removal" regression analyses were performed among the three social support variables in order to determine the contribution of each variable, above and beyond the common, overlapping content, to school staying plans. The unique contribution of each variable above and beyond the common, overlapping content (R-squared) is: family .10, friend .03, and ethnic .02 (see Table 4).

Thus, most of the impact on school staying comes from family's and friends' valuing of education, with ethnic group's valuing having a lesser independent influence.

Separate regression analyses were carried out for males and females. Males and females are similar but different: for both groups, family valuing is one of two predictors of planned school staying. However, for females, the relative impact of peers is considerably stronger, and that of families is weaker than it is for males and only family's valuing and friends' valuing of education are significantly related to school staying; while for males, only family's and ethnic group's valuing of education are significantly related to school staying; friends' valuing is not.

Social support for education has a substantial impact on school staying plans, accounting for 24% of the variance in these plans. This compares very favorably with other reported multiple correlations with dropout: Brennan and Anderson (1990) obtained an R-squared of .30 using over 25 predictor variables; Ekstrom and associates (1986) obtained an R-squared (estimated from Table 7, p. 62) of .11 using over 20 variables; Hanson and Ginsburg (1988) obtained an R-squared of .16 using 18 variables; and Pittman (1991) obtained an R-squared of .20 using 11 variables.

Discussion

In interpreting the results of this study one must keep in mind that the sample was not chosen in a way that makes it representative of all high school students; the sample came from only one high school, in one geographical region, and comprises a student body with very high school staying plans.

A second limitation of the study is the restricted range of responses; over 75% of the responses to items were in the highest response categories. This restricted range of responses probably accounts for: 1) the low reliability of scales, which more likely is a result of the restricted range of responses than of flaws in item construction; and 2) the limited potential degree of correlation between social support and school staying plans.

A third limitation of the study is that, because it reports findings solely from the first phase of a longitudinal study, dropout, itself, could not be studied; instead, the proxy variable, "school staying plans" was used. However, school

staying plans and dropout have been found to correlate highly (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Hanson & Ginsburg, 1988; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

Finally, it is important to recall that the sample comprised exclusively tenth-grade students, most of whom are approximately 15 years old. Therefore, interpretations of data need to be made in light of the school year and age of this group.

The data reported in this study indicate that social support for school staying exerts a strong influence on students' school staying plans. These findings are consistent with, and help to interpret, the fragmented, scattered and incidental findings about valuing education from other studies (Brennan & Anderson, 1990; Delgado-Gaitan, 1988; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Frank, 1990; Hanson & Ginsburg, 1988; Pittman, 1991; Rumberger, 1983; Rumberger et al., 1990; Schrom, 1980; Stedman, et al., 1988).

Social support for education was conceptualized as family, friends' and ethnic group's valuing of education. These three variables, combined, had a considerable common influence on the student's school staying plans. The considerable overlap among the variables may indicate that students tend to choose friends with the same values as their family's; and that students tend to choose friends who are members of the same ethnic group to which the students, themselves, belong.

While each social support variable was significantly related to school staying plans, there were differences in the size of correlation between each one and school staying plans; and in the

size of independent contribution made by each. Family valuing of education produced the strongest independent contribution to school staying plans; friends' valuing exerted a lesser independent influence; and ethnic group's valuing of education produced the smallest independent contribution.

Males and females were similar in that although the school staying plans of both are affected by social support, especially that of the family, differences did emerge between the sexes: females' school staying plans are more affected by their peers whereas males' school staying plans are more influenced by their families. These differences may reflect differences in stage of development: perhaps tenth-grade females are more mature in regard to their separation from family than are males and therefore are more influenced by people external to the family, i.e., friends, than are tenth grade males.

An elaborated version of bonding theory is useful for understanding and predicting school staying behavior of adolescents. This expanded version views the adolescent's behavior in any given area as a function of the degree to which the adolescent has bonded with representatives of the larger society and the level of valuing of the target behavior manifested by these representatives. This explication takes into consideration not only the bonding of the adolescent to the representatives of the larger society but also the degree of valuing of education that these representatives of society manifest. One would expect a higher level of school staying on

the part of the adolescent who is both strongly bonded with either a parent, peer or member of other community group, for example ethnic community, and whose "bondee" manifests a high level of valuing social support for school staying.

The findings indicate the need for social support variables to be taken into consideration in research, programs and policies dealing with dropout.

Researchers should include these variables in their conceptualizations in attempting to understand the process of dropping out and in their empirical studies attempting to predict dropping out.

Programs targeted at preventing dropout should include some procedure for enhancing social support for remaining in school if there are deficits in this area. However, since social values are well known to be quite resistant to change efforts, interventions directly aimed at changing the attitudes of an individual's parents, peers or ethnic group have little likelihood of succeeding. A more promising alternative strategy would be to create new primary social groups, either associated with the school or external to it, with which the adolescent may bond, and which reflect high levels of social support for staying in school. Rumberger and colleagues (1990) have advocated the development of substitute systems for such social support when family support is absent. These programs should be designed with the developmental stage of adolescent in mind; that is, with the recognition of increasing adolescent need to develop bonds with

non-familial face-to-face groups. Moreover, since females and males develop at different rates, these new groups may need to be differentiated along gender lines; females may be ready to participate at a younger age than males.

Abi-Nader (1991) described an innovative program which created new "primary" social groups with high levels of social support for staying in school. This type of program needs to be characterized by high social acceptance and warmth to establish emotion-based attachment on the part of a targeted student, and have expressed goals other than influencing students to stay in school - keeping the influencing of school staying as a latent function.

This paper reported the findings of a study which tested the relationship between social support for education and high school dropout. The study provides evidence strongly indicating the importance of social support variables in the student's school staying plans. These findings should be taken into consideration by those wishing to further understand, or develop programs or policies for dropouts.

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Table 1

Distribution on Scales For Social Support For Education and School Staying Plans

Variable	Range of Possible Scores	$\bar{X}$	SD	Skewness	Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)
Family's Valuing of Education	4-20	19.3	1.3	-2.3	.45
Friends' Valuing of Education	4-20	17.0	2.6	-1.2	.63
Ethnic Group's Valuing of Education	3-15	13.3	2.0	-1.6	.62
School Staying Plans	3-15	14.7	0.9	-4.2	.68

Table 2

Factor Loadings* of Social Support Items

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Family 1	.80		
Family 2	.68		
Family 3	.58		
Family 4	.48		
Friend 1		.74	
Friend 2		.70	
Friend 3		.69	
Friend 4		.55	
Ethnic 1			.76
Ethnic 2			.74
Ethnic 3			.68

*Loadings >.40 reported

Table 3

Description of Sample

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	141	46
Male	164	54
Ethnic Groups		
Asian	23	8
African-American	29	10
Caribbean (non-Latino, non-Haitian)	20	7
Haitian	43	14
Jewish	90	30
Latino	19	6
West European	38	12
Other	43	14
Foreign-born		
Student	67	22
Mother	129	42
Father	146	48
Parents Education (Some college)		
Mother	200	66
Father	194	64

Table 4

Independent Contribution and Multiple Correlation Between Antecedent Variables and School Staying Plans

Variable	*Zero Order Correlation	*Beta	*Cumulative R-squared	*R-squared If Variable Removed
Family's Valuing of Education	.41	.33	.17	.10
Friends' Valuing of Education	.32	.19	.22	.03
Ethnic Group's Valuing of Education	.29	.14	.24	.02

*All values, $p<.01$

$\underline{N} = 305$